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ABSTRACT

This report identifies changes that schools must make in their kindergarten and primary programs if they are to contribute to rather than hinder progress toward the achievement of school readiness for all children, as expressed in goal one of the America 2000 initiative. Schools need to: (1) implement developmentally appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices; (2) disregard the results of norm-referenced achievement tests for the assessment of the progress or potential of preschool and primary-age children; (3) refrain from retaining at-risk children or forcing them to start school later; (4) increase funds for early intervention programs in the primary grades, especially tutoring by certified teachers; (5) increase parental involvement and participation; (6) adopt formal, written policies to improve teacher-parent communication; (7) require that primary school teachers and administrators have formal training in child development and early childhood education; (8) have increased flexibility in the way they use state and federal funds, but be held accountable for producing the desired results. Specific programs developed to implement these policies are highlighted. (Contains 15 references.) (MDM)

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Getting Schools Ready for Children

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE READINESS GOAL

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#94H02

Executive Summary

BY THE YEAR 2000—

All children will be ready for the first grade.

Goals for Education
CHALLENGE 2000

Achieving the first national and regional education goal—readiness for school—requires more than just helping children be ready for school. Schools must also be ready to meet the needs of all children, including those who are less ready than we would like them to be. The benefits of high quality preschool programs and other measures to improve children's readiness can be lost very quickly when students enter schools that are not ready to help them sustain those gains.

Making schools ready for all children will require fundamental changes in the way most primary schools look and function. Our knowledge and understanding of how children develop and learn has expanded dramatically in recent decades. There is broad agreement among experts in early childhood education about the ways schools can enhance rather than inhibit that learning. Yet the typical primary school classroom in the United States has changed very little.

The resources to make the needed changes are, to a large degree, already in place. But a fundamental shift in the way those resources are used must occur. Failure of primary school students to master basic skills and develop positive attitudes toward learning leads to problems that typically can be addressed only at high cost and with marginal chances of success in later grades. Focusing more of the resources now used for remediation on assuring success for all students in the primary years would yield a far greater return on our investment.

This report identifies changes that schools must make in their kindergarten and primary programs if they are to contribute to rather than hinder progress toward achieving Goal 1.

- All schools should implement developmentally appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices in kindergarten and grades 1-3.
- Results on standardized norm-referenced achievement tests should not be used to assess the progress or potential of individual preschool or primary-age children; each child's progress should be com-

pared primarily to his or her own previous performance and to standards for development of critical skills.

- Strategies such as holding "at-risk" children out of school or requiring them to repeat kindergarten or a primary grade have been proven ineffective and even harmful and should be eliminated as options for most children.
- Funds currently used to provide remediation in later grades should be available to schools to support early intervention services that have been proven effective in helping individual children achieve success, most notably, intensive one-to-one tutoring by certified teachers.
- Schools should create an environment that encourages and assists parents in becoming actively involved in their children's education, and that rewards teachers for helping them to do so.
- Schools should adopt formal, written policies and procedures to improve communication between teachers and parents (or other caregivers) and to ease the transitions of both children and families as they move from preschool to school and between kindergarten and the primary grades.
- Kindergarten and primary grade teachers, as well as elementary school administrators, should be required to have formal training in child development and early childhood education.
- Schools should have substantially increased flexibility in the way they spend state and local funds to help all primary age children achieve success, but should be held accountable for producing the desired results.

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Getting Schools Ready for Children

Since the adoption of regional education goals in 1988 and national goals in 1990, most efforts to achieve Goal 1—*readiness for school*—have focused on children's development in the pre-school years. The 1992 SREB report *Readiness for School: The Early Childhood Challenge* provided a framework and guiding principles for addressing the problems faced by preschool children and their families.

But it is not enough to help children be ready for school. Schools must also be ready to meet the needs of all children. In far too many cases, schools today are as unprepared to help all children achieve success as are many of the children themselves. Achieving Goal 1 will require fundamental changes in the way most primary schools look and function.

Evidence of the need for change is plentiful. According to the 1994 *Kids Count Data Book*, almost 11 percent of infants in the SREB states are born to unwed teenage mothers, and one of every three teens fails to complete high school on time. Both rates have worsened since the mid-1980s. During the same period, violent crime arrest rates for youths age 10-17 have nearly doubled, while violent death rates for teens age 15-19 have risen by 14 percent.

The economic and social costs to society of these and related problems are enormous, and the seeds that ultimately produce those unwelcome harvests often are sown during the early childhood years—birth through age eight. Research has found strong evidence that even violent criminal behavior in later life can be linked to problems occurring in early childhood.

The youth who have generated these dismal statistics are products of schools that have changed relatively little in the past two decades. Aside from the addition of computers, the typical primary classroom today looks much as it did prior to World War II, when almost ten percent of the 18 million young men drafted for military duty were found to be "mentally deficient," a euphemism for illiterate.

The second half of the twentieth century has been a period of astonishing and unprecedented growth in scientific knowledge and understanding. Advances in the biological and physical sciences have revolutionized health care, communications, and countless other fields. Despite equally dramatic gains in our knowledge of how children develop and learn, however, educational change has not kept pace. The hospital or

the telephone switching operation of the 1990s would be almost unrecognizable to someone who last worked in those industries 25 years ago. The typical primary school classroom, in contrast, would look quite familiar to a time traveller from the 1950s or even earlier.

Schools can be part of the solution

Broad agreement exists among experts in child development and early childhood education about the ways children learn and the ways schools can enhance rather than inhibit that learning. The purpose of this report is to examine the changes needed to make all primary schools—kindergarten through grade three—part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Primary schools that are ready to meet the increasingly diverse needs of today's children will look different from those most of today's adults experienced. But the ultimate goal remains the same—to help all children acquire the social and academic skills they will need to achieve success in the fourth and fifth grades and beyond.

Accomplishing the needed changes will not be easy and will not happen overnight. Success will require school administrators, teachers, and parents to change their behaviors and their expectations of both children and schools. The resources and knowledge to make those changes are, to a large degree, already in place. But a fundamental shift is needed in the way those resources—human and otherwise—are used to give children the best possible start in school.

Early Childhood Education = Preschool + Primary

The emphasis on preschool issues in most efforts to achieve the readiness goal is understandable. The problems faced by preschool children and their families are complex, and few of these problems have been addressed systematically in the past. But the idea that primary schools also have a key role in achieving Goal 1 has won widespread acceptance in the public policy arena.

"While the concept of school readiness focuses attention on those years just prior to formal schooling, it incorporates the critical periods of growth from birth to about age 8."

United States Department of Education

"An early childhood program is any part-day or full-day group program in a center, school, or other facility, that serves children from birth through age 8. Early childhood programs include child care centers, private and public pre-schools, kindergartens, and primary grade schools."

National Association for the Education of Young Children

"School readiness is not solely determined by the quality of early childhood programs. Readiness also depends on the expectations and capacities of elementary schools."

National Association of State Boards of Education

Child Development and Learning: Guiding Principles

The central component in making schools more ready for children is an understanding of the way young children learn. Young children are not just smaller and less experienced versions of older children and adults. The National Association of Elementary School Principals has expressed this point very clearly:

> *Children in the three-to-eight age range acquire knowledge in ways that are significantly different from the way older children learn. Younger children learn best through direct sensory encounters with the world and not through formal academic processes. Since early childhood is a period of rapid mental growth and development, children seek out the stimuli they need to nourish these developmental abilities. . . Young children acquire knowledge by manipulating, exploring, and experimenting with real objects. They learn almost exclusively by doing, and through movement.* *

The body of research confirming this concept of how children learn grows daily. Its importance to the design of effective pre-school programs has gained increasing acceptance, although the reality of many pre-school settings admittedly lags behind.

Outmoded instructional models

An understanding of the way young children learn is equally crucial in kindergarten and the primary grades, yet too few schools provide a primary education that reflects such an understanding. On the contrary, far too many schools continue to use outmoded instructional models for grades K-3 that are inappropriate for the developmental levels of virtually all children during those years. The benefits of high quality pre-school programs and other measures to improve children's readiness can be lost very quickly when students enter schools that are not ready for them.

The failures that children experience because of unrealistic and inappropriate expectations in kindergarten and the primary grades can have lasting effects. Children's attitudes toward themselves as learners and their expectations about their chances for success in school are well established by the end of grade three.

* References cited in this report refer to the upper range of early childhood as being anywhere from the end of the child's seventh year to age nine. These variations in terms reflect the imprecision of measuring developmental age for individual children, in contrast to chronological age.

How can the potential negative consequences of inappropriate primary school practices be avoided? What should a school that is developmentally appropriate and ready for all children look like? The most effective way to answer those questions is to examine the way most primary schools look today in contrast to the way we know they should look.

How Children Learn

The following principles, adapted from the Southern Early Childhood Association's position statement on Continuity of Learning for Four-to-Seven-Year-Old Children, *provide further insight into children as learners.*

1. *Children learn and grow as whole persons.* Children learn best when their physical and emotional needs are met and they feel safe and secure. The child's self-image strongly affects his or her eagerness to learn and ability to do so.

2. *Children learn through active engagement and through conversation and dialogue concerning their experiences.* Young children are concrete learners who construct knowledge based on direct sensory experiences. For children, play is serious work.

3. *All children can learn, and given appropriate settings, want to learn.* Children are persistent, curious, and creative; they want very badly to make sense out of their world.

4. *Children learn quickly when material is presented in meaningful ways at appropriate times.* Traditional teacher-focused models are unsuitable for the ways young children learn and the ways their developing brains function. They learn best when actively involved in activities they have a role in initiating.

5. *Children exhibit different learning styles.* Programs for young children should offer multisensory experiences and opportunities to choose from a variety of materials appropriate to their individual learning styles. Cultural and linguistic diversity should be viewed as opportunities to expand children's learning options rather than problems to be resolved by standardization and enforced homogeneity.

6. *Children grow and develop through predictable stages, but at individual rates.* Learning is not a lock-step, linear progression; effective programs must respond to the unique needs and learning schedules of different children. In any group of children spanning an age range of one year, younger children will tend to be somewhat behind older children in their developmental progress. Such differences typically disappear within a few years when the children move forward as a group.

SOURCE: *Continuity of Learning for Four to Seven Year Old Children, A Position Statement*. Southern Early Childhood Association, Little Rock, Arkansas, 1990.

Curriculum in early childhood programs, including primary schools, should be viewed in the broadest possible terms. The compartmentalization of activities into school, work, and play that typifies the lives of older children and adults is largely meaningless for young children. Virtually everything that happens in the child's life involves learning, whether explicitly identified as such or not. While it is possible, for example, to design programs specifically to achieve certain educational outcomes, it is impossible to design any form of child care, regardless of the child's age, that does not involve learning.

Curriculum in the primary school should be viewed in the same way. All planned activities, including classroom work, field trips, organized play, sports, and even routine meals and naps are integral parts of any early childhood curriculum. A developmentally appropriate curriculum is based on knowledge of the stages of child development and an understanding that each child is unique and that each child's experiences should match his or her developing abilities.

In far too many primary schools today, curriculum is defined in much narrower, academic terms. The result is a primary school experience that is developmentally *in*appropriate for many children. The effects of such inappropriate experiences on later school success can be dramatic.

A recent study by the District of Columbia Schools of 461 children over a period of seven years concluded that, in both pre-school and the primary grades,

Overly academic programs hinder progress

> *Overly academic early learning experiences impact negatively on children's ability to successfully transition from the primary grades to upper elementary . . . children's academic and developmental progress through school is enhanced by more active, child-initiated early learning experiences. Their progress is slowed by the "escalated curriculum" which introduces formal learning experiences too early for most children's developmental status.*

Children in this study who had participated in developmentally appropriate early childhood education programs, whether their first formal learning experiences were in pre-school or in kindergarten, were found to perform consistently better in fourth grade math, reading, language, spelling, and science than those who had experienced academically-oriented or even mixed academic/developmental programs. Boys in particu-

Developmental Appropriateness Defined

Although the quality of an early childhood program may be affected by many factors, a major determinant of program quality is the extent to which knowledge of child development is applied in day-to-day practices—the degree to which the program is "developmentally appropriate."

The concept of developmental appropriateness has two dimensions: age appropriateness and individual appropriateness.

1. **Age appropriateness**. Human development research indicates that there are universal, predictable sequences of growth and change that occur in children during the first nine years of life. These predictable changes occur in all domains of development—physical, emotional, social, and cognitive. Knowledge of typical development of children within the age span served by the program provides a framework from which teachers prepare the learning environment and plan appropriate experiences.

2. **Individual appropriateness**. Each child is a unique person with an individual pattern and timing of growth, as well as an individual personality, learning style, and family background. Both the curriculum and adults' interactions with children should be responsive to individual differences. Learning in young children is the result of interaction between the child's thoughts and experiences with materials, ideas, and people. These experiences should match the child's developing abilities while also challenging the child's interest and understanding.

SOURCE: S. Bredekamp, Ed. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8*. National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, 1988.

lar were found to benefit substantially from kindergartens that placed greater emphasis on socio-emotional development rather than academics alone.

Appropriate Versus Inappropriate Curriculum and Instruction

One of the most difficult obstacles to making primary schools developmentally appropriate is the widespread belief that some practices now known to be inappropriate are "essential" characteristics of good schools.

What do we mean when we say that a curriculum is inappropriate?

Many adults, including both parents and teachers, believe that young children should spend large blocks of time sitting quietly at desks while the teacher "teaches," or working independently and silently on assigned tasks. In such classrooms, different subjects are taught in discrete blocks of time, with primary emphasis on reading and, secondarily, math. The children's activities are teacher-initiated and directed; much of their time is spent in isolation, working on practice exercises and worksheets.

Primary-age children are neither physically or emotionally ready for this academic model. Their attention spans are not long enough to allow them to focus on discrete subject matter for more than a few minutes at a time. Similarly, it is inappropriate to expect them to sit working quietly for extended periods. Their growing bodies require physical action as they continue to develop and refine motor skills and coordination. For children in this age group, sitting for long periods may actually be more tiring than running and jumping.

Learning by exploration and experience

Young children learn best when they are allowed to actively explore their environment, using materials in a hands-on fashion to learn specific concepts and building on their natural curiosity and desire to make sense of the world around them. Their learning style in the kindergarten and primary years lends itself to an integrated approach to curriculum rather than a subject-specific approach. Inflexible, academic curriculum models do not allow children the freedom they need to use their imaginations and their senses in self-directed, hands-on activities.

Play and Learning

Few aspects of developmentally appropriate practice for young children are as widely misunderstood by adults as the often repeated idea that "play is the work of children." The excerpts below represent one kindergarten teacher's attempt to communicate the concept of a play-centered curriculum to skeptical parents.

"Perhaps the most important task of the kindergarten teacher is to structure what children see as play, to promote what the adult sees as discovery, reasoning, thought, and emotional and social growth. When children play in the dramatic-play areas, they are dealing with important issues in their lives. When children play with the blocks and other manipulatives, they are engaged in complex mathematical reasoning and problem solving. . . . there is a large difference between random play and play with a purpose.

"The typical kindergarten child might come home from a day at school and when asked about his or her day, reply: *School was fine, I played, had a snack, sang a song, heard a story, and had fun.*" What the child won't say is:

> *Today I studied rhyming words and beginning and ending sounds by singing "A Hunting We Will Go" and filling in the missing words. . . I worked on improving my listening skills and on differentiating my right from my left by playing "Simon Says". . . and I took responsibility for myself and cooperated with others by independently making choices, following through on them, and cleaning up after myself during activity and snack time. . . .*

"The child's saying that he played should be interpreted as a statement that learning was fun."

SOURCE: Edson, A. "Crossing the Great Divide: The Nursery School Child Goes to Kindergarten," *Young Children*, 49 (July 1994), 69-75.

Regular interaction with teachers and peers

Young children benefit most from regular and supportive interaction with teachers and peers. In too many primary classrooms, young children receive information from teachers passively. They are restrained from communicating with their peers, when what they really need is to interact with other children to practice their emerging social skills and develop a common frame of reference. As they move from kindergarten through first, second, and third grades, children become increasingly able to reason and communicate with others. During this period, they can be introduced gradually to more formal academic learning models.

Many adults assume that the alternative to a highly structured, teacher-directed classroom must be chaos. In fact, the opposite is more often true. The visitor to a developmentally appropriate primary classroom is often surprised to see children working together in small groups with minimal teacher supervision. In contrast, teachers in more traditional classrooms tend to spend considerable amounts of time trying to control disruptive behavior that results when all children are expected to behave in the same way at the same time, regardless of their developmental needs.

Testing and Assessment

Widespread concerns about the quality of American education have resulted in an increased emphasis on testing in recent years. Standardized, norm-referenced achievement tests have become a staple of both student and program evaluation at all levels of education. The developmental inappropriateness of many primary schools is a response in part to the increased use of such tests in the earliest grades.

Use and misuse of tests

Standardized tests of all types can and do play a valuable role in helping to evaluate overall progress toward desired outcomes—the education goals, for example. Testing also can be useful in evaluating the educational achievement of individual students at higher levels of the educational system.

The use of standardized norm-referenced achievement tests to assess either the individual progress or potential of primary-age and younger children is not appropriate, however. By definition, such tests compare children with each other as if development were uniform. They are constructed so that half of all children who take them must score below the "norm," even though they may actually be within the range of what is considered "normal" from a developmental perspective. In general, the younger the age group, the more dramatic the variations in development within the group and the more likely that differences in test scores reflect differences in age or developmental level rather than in ability.

Drawing the wrong conclusions

Unfortunately, few parents, teachers, or administrators fully understand the limitations of standardized tests. As a result, test scores are often used to draw inappropriate conclusions about individual children's strengths and weaknesses and to make decisions about their educational careers. Parents and teachers may erroneously lower their expectations for some children, and the general perception that test results that fall below the norm are equivalent to failure can have a devastating impact on the expectations and self-esteem of the children themselves.

The damage is compounded when results on standardized tests are used to hold primary school teachers accountable for their effectiveness. Test results may come to be viewed as ends in themselves, leading to a curriculum that focuses too narrowly on "teaching to the test." In many cases, this has meant extending curriculum models that may be appropriate for older children downward to ages where they are not appropriate. What used to be taught in second grade is now taught in first grade, what

Types of Standardized Tests

A standardized test is one that is administered and scored using uniform procedures to make scores comparable from one test-taker to another.

Most standardized tests fall into two primary categories: norm-referenced and criterion-referenced.

Norm-referenced tests are designed to compare the performance of individual students to those of a large group of students. College entrance exams like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) are examples of norm-referenced testing.

Criterion-referenced tests compare an individual's performance to clearly defined learning tasks or skill levels. Licensure and certification exams are usually criterion-referenced since they seek to ensure minimum levels of knowledge or competence rather than comparing test-takers to one another.

A further distinction can be made between aptitude tests and achievement tests.

Aptitude tests assess individual potential and predict subsequent performance, which are affected by a wide range of different influences.

Achievement tests are designed to measure learning outcomes that result from relatively standardized and specific experiences such as schooling.

Standardized tests of all types can be designed using a variety of different formats, including essays, oral exams, experiments, exhibitions, and portfolios. Multiple-choice and true/false are by far the most common formats because they are the easiest and least costly to design, administer, and score using existing technology.

SOURCE: *Testing in American Schools: Asking the Right Questions*. Congress of the United States, Office of Technology Assessment, Washington, 1992.

used to be taught in first grade is now taught in kindergarten, and what used to be taught in kindergarten now appears on tests used to determine children's "readiness" for school.

Testing hurts at-risk children

This kind of overemphasis on preparing students to take tests often results in unrealistic expectations about what children should know at any given level. These unrealistic standards hurt at-risk students most, but even advantaged children often find the inappropriate demands difficult to meet.

Kindergarten is still widely viewed as being a transitional year in which children are supposed to be preparing for the first grade. That used to mean familiarizing children with the rules and routines of schooling. But many kindergarten teachers now describe their job as "preparing children for the academic rigors to come." The kind of integrated, child-directed learning that is most effective for young children is sacrificed to the institutional goal of producing high test scores. Kindergartens and first grade classrooms may become "more like boot camps than like the child-centered learning environments they should be."

First grade as "boot camp"

Children who have attended high-quality, developmentally appropriate pre-schools are likely to encounter difficulties if they enter an inappropriate, test-driven, academic kindergarten. Unfortunately, parents often erroneously conclude that the problem lies with the pre-school. This perception results in turn in pressure on pre-schools to adopt inappropriate curriculum models themselves so their children will perform better on tests that have little or no relevance for their true developmental progress.

Developmentally Appropriate Assessment

The inappropriateness of standardized norm-referenced achievement tests for evaluating individual young children does not mean that their progress should not be assessed. But assessment should be a natural and ongoing part of learning, and assessment techniques should meet the same standards for developmental appropriateness as curricula.

Assessment should be natural and ongoing

In kindergarten and through grade three, each child's progress should be compared primarily to his or her own previous performance and to standards for the development of critical skills. Comparisons to other individual children—especially those based on norm-referenced test scores—should be discouraged. Criterion-referenced scales can be used to compare the performance of individual children with state or national standards. This comparison provides guidance on the child's overall progress without promoting counter-productive competition among

young children (or their parents) at different developmental levels. Lack of understanding of the different types of tests, however, can often lead to misinterpretation and misuse of criterion-referenced tests as well, so their use for individual children should be approached cautiously.

Performance inventories and portfolios

The most meaningful approach to assessment of individual young children is through continual observation by teachers and parents of children's progress in all developmental domains, including social, emotional, physical, and cognitive. Performance inventories and portfolios of children's work provide a far more meaningful picture of the young child's progress than any standardized test results. Similarly, narrative reports by teachers outlining children's progress are far more useful at the primary level than numeric or letter grades, since they provide information that can be used by parents to help their children at home.

Exclusion and Retention: Failed Strategies

Exclusion—delaying children's entry into school—and retention—requiring children to repeat an entire grade—have been two of the most widely used strategies for dealing with the readiness issue. Both are simplistic and one-sided responses to a complicated problem.

Attempts to manipulate the age at which children enter school or advance from one grade level to another reflect a common misconception—that school-entry age is in some way a developmental criterion. In fact, neither the legal age at which children are eligible to enter school or the schools' expectations of them when they arrive have much relationship to child development. On the contrary, the legal school entry age is an arbitrary point at which society agrees to assume responsibility for, and bear the costs of, a large portion of a child's education and care.

Most available research indicates that both exclusion and retention are ineffective strategies at best and may even worsen a child's chances of educational success. After reviewing existing research on achieving the readiness goal, the United States Department of Education's Office of Research concluded recently that:

Focus on what happens in the classroom

> *Current "improvement" strategies related to kindergarten and the early elementary grades often focus on changing external conditions: raising the entry age, delaying entry, and readiness testing are examples. Research indicates that interventions like these are not effective and may sometimes be harmful. Instead of such external strategies, research suggests that improvement efforts should focus more on the nature and quality of what happens inside early education programs—on children's actual educational experiences.*

School-Entry Age

For the vast majority of children, chronological age represents the most equitable basis for determining eligibility for school entry. Most states allow children to enter public school kindergarten at the beginning of the academic year if they reach their fifth birthday on or before a specified date. In Great Britain and New Zealand, a child immediately becomes eligible to enter school on his or her birthday, whenever that occurs during the year. This policy has the effect of forcing schools to respond to each child individually from the outset.

Is This Primary Program Developmentally Appropriate? (A Checklist)

Yes __ No __ 1. Does the curriculum integrate learning in all areas through projects, learning centers, and playful activities?

Inappropriate Practice: The curriculum is divided into separate subjects taught through specialized activities and in isolated time periods.

Yes __ No __ 2. Do teachers and children work together to develop projects and activities that build on children's current interests?

Inappropriate Practice: Instruction is teacher-directed and follows an inflexible schedule.

Yes __ No __ 3. Do children spend large amounts of time working cooperatively in small groups?

Inappropriate Practice: Children are expected to work silently and alone doing worksheets and other rote exercises.

Yes __ No __ 4. Are a variety of learning materials available, including objects children can manipulate and experiment with?

Inappropriate Practice: Materials are limited mainly to books, workbooks, and pencils.

Yes __ No __ 5. Do teachers view parents as partners, welcoming and encouraging participation in their children's educations?

Inappropriate Practice: Teachers have little time to spare for parents and view them as incompetent to participate in their children's educations.

Yes __ No __ 6. Is each child's progress assessed primarily through observation and recording of work done?

Inappropriate Practice: Children are tested regularly on individual subjects, with teaching geared primarily to achieving high test scores.

Yes __ No __ 7. Is each child's progress reported to parents in narrative form and in comparison to her or his own previous performance?

Inappropriate Practice: Children's progress is reported to parents in numerical or letter grades and compared to other children and standardized averages.

Yes __ No __ 8. Are children allowed to progress in different areas as they acquire competence in those areas?

Inappropriate Practice: Children repeat entire grades or are placed in "transitional" classes if they do not master skills at specified intervals.

Yes __ No __ 9. Do classroom groups vary in size and composition depending on individual children's needs?

Inappropriate Practice: Children are grouped primarily by chronological age and tracked into homogeneous groups according to ability level.

Yes __ No __ 10. Are special needs children integrated into the mainstream classroom?

Inappropriate Practice: Special needs children are nominally assigned to regular classes but spend most of their time away from the classroom or in segregated groups within the classroom.

Yes __ No __ 11. Do teachers provide program continuity to help smooth children's transitions between groups and/or activities throughout the day?

Inappropriate Practice: The child's day is fragmented into multiple specialized and unconnected activities.

Yes __ No __ 12. Do teachers communicate regularly with each other about individual children's needs?

Inappropriate Practice: Children are required to alter their behaviors and learning styles to conform to the needs and desires of different teachers.

SOURCE: Adapted from S. Bredekamp, Ed. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*. National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, 1986, 62-82.

Recognizing difference as normal

Regardless of where school entry age is set, the need to group children in some way will always produce variations in age and developmental level. Any group of comparable age children will always include one who is the youngest, the smallest, the least able, and the least mature. A single child may fit all of those descriptions; but it is equally likely that they will describe different children in the same class. These differences should not present problems for individual children in the group unless the school fails to accommodate them through developmentally appropriate, individualized curriculum and instruction practices.

Raising the school-entry age does have the effect of increasing the average developmental level of any given class of students. It does nothing to reduce the developmental *range* of the children, however, since it increases both the upper and lower age limits in the class.

All children can succeed

Few children at age five will be ready to enter a kindergarten that is more appropriate to the developmental range of seven-year-olds. On the other hand, virtually all children, except perhaps those with the most severe disabilities, should be able to succeed in a kindergarten that is both age appropriate and flexible enough to respond to individual developmental differences.

Raising school-entry age may produce short-run boosts in achievement test scores. But in the long-run, it is more likely to have detrimental effects on students' educational progress.

Delaying entry delays progress

Because raising school-entry age postpones the point at which children can begin to accrue the advantages of public education, it has the most negative impact on those at greatest risk of school failure. Children from disadvantaged environments and those whose parents are least prepared to be their child's first teacher are likely to end up even farther behind their peers if school entry is delayed. While some of these children may be able to benefit from publicly supported pre-school programs, many others will not have access to such programs. In addition, families with limited resources will face added financial burdens because of the need to provide child care for children who are delayed an extra year.

Readiness Tests and Holding Out

The use of "readiness" tests to exclude some children who are legally old enough to enter school is even more problematic than raising overall school-entry age. Developmentally appropriate assessments prior to entering school can be extremely valuable in planning to meet the needs of individual children. Using tests to delay children's entry into school, however, serves only to help schools avoid their responsibility to meet the needs of all children.

Children who are old enough to enter school but whose entry is delayed because they are judged "not ready," are placed at a double disadvantage. They lose a year in which they could begin to reap the benefits of attending public school. They also face the psychological burden of being a grade behind their age-group peers before they even start school. As with raising school-entry age, children who are most in need of the services and, equally important, the social structure that school offers are most likely to be excluded from receiving those benefits.

Unfortunately, not only schools but many parents as well have responded to increased academic expectations in primary school by seek-

Readiness for School: What Kindergarten Teachers Think Is Important

In spite of pressures to produce high test scores, most kindergarten teachers understand that social, emotional, and physical well-being have a far greater impact on children's chances for success when they enter school than any specific types of knowledge and skills.

In the spring of 1993, the National Center for Education Statistics conducted a survey to determine kindergarten teachers' views on children's readiness for school. As part of the survey, a nationwide sample of more than 1,400 public school kindergarten teachers was asked to rate the importance of 15 qualities for school readiness.

The top three qualities kindergarten teachers rated **VERY IMPORTANT** or **ESSENTIAL** for readiness were:

1. The child is physically healthy, rested, and well nourished (96 percent of teachers);
2. The child is able to communicate needs, wants, and thoughts verbally *in the child's primary language* (84 percent);
3. The child is enthusiastic and curious in approaching new activities (76 percent).

The two qualities most kindergarten teachers rated as **NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT** or **NOT VERY IMPORTANT** for readiness were:

A. The child can count to 20 or more (67 percent);
B. The child knows the letters of the alphabet (57 percent).

A majority of teachers (88 percent) agree or strongly agree that "readiness comes as children grow and mature, you can't push it." However, 94 percent of teachers also believe that they "can enhance children's readiness" by providing appropriate experiences to help build important skills.

The surveyed teachers averaged 14 years of teaching experience overall and nine years of kindergarten experience. Slightly over half (54 percent) had majored in early childhood education.

SOURCE: *Public School Kindergarten Teachers' Views on Children's Readiness for School* (NCES 93-410). U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Washington, 1993.

ing to delay the age at which their children enter school. Some parents, including many who are high-achievers themselves, seek to hold their children out of school for an extra year in the mistaken belief that this delay will give their children an advantage over younger classmates when they do enter school. Research has shown, however, that children who are held out gain no lasting advantages, regardless of background. On the contrary, being held out may eventually contribute to their dropping out of school.

"Red-shirting" is not the answer

Whether initiated by schools or by individual parents, delaying children's entry into school is more likely to hinder than help their long-range educational success. Delaying school entry might be compared to the practice of "red-shirting" athletes to give them an advantage over opponents in age and size. (Some parents even go so far as to hold young children out of school for an extra year for athletic reasons alone.) Red-shirting college athletes may enable them to grow and build skills in anticipation of the rigors of competitive sports, but it does not help young children become winners. For young academic red-shirts, the social, emotional, and cognitive costs of a year's delay in beginning school will, in most cases, far outweigh any gains.

Grade Retention and Extra-Year Classes

Retention is "unequivocally negative"

Requiring students to repeat a grade because of poor performance is another familiar and widely accepted school practice in the United States. It is a practice that has little or no justification in terms of what we know about its effects. One review of the research on retention concluded that it "would be difficult to find another educational practice on which the evidence is so unequivocally negative."

In virtually all school systems, a disproportionate share of retention occurs in kindergarten and the primary grades. A variation of grade retention that has been used in some schools is to place children in so-called "transitional" classes for a year before promoting them to the next grade level. The stated goal of both retention and transitional classes is to give children who have encountered difficulty an extra year to become better prepared for the demands of the next regular grade. But available evidence suggests that neither approach is effective in achieving that goal.

Retention promotes failure

Studies of children whose families choose to have them promoted even though teachers recommend retention or placement in transitional classes have found that the promoted children consistently perform as well as or better than their retained peers. Children who have been retained typically report less school enjoyment, demonstrate lower third grade achievement test scores, and are more likely to drop out of school than those who have not been retained.

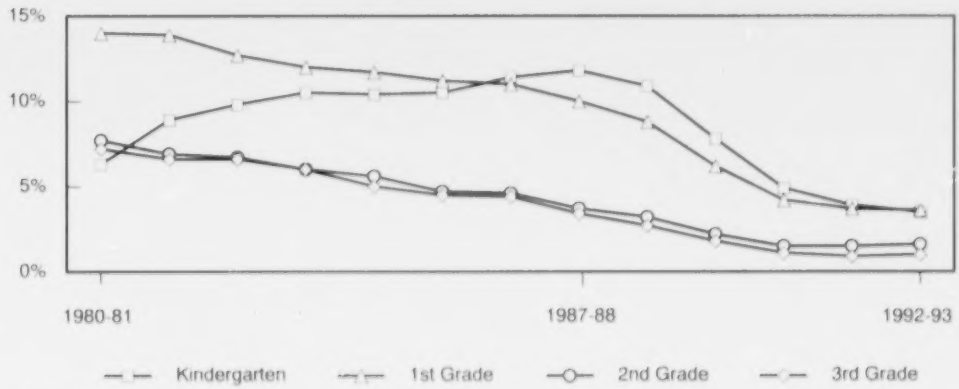
Falling Retention Rates in Florida

In 1976, Florida began requiring third graders to pass a minimum-skills test before being promoted to fourth grade. Typically, the introduction of such a promotion-linked test has an immediate impact on retention rates in the grade in which it is given. Over time, however, retention tends to shift to lower grades as teachers and administrators attempt to reduce the number of failures, in part by delaying the point at which some children take the test.

The Florida experience followed this pattern. By 1980, more than 7 percent of third graders and a slightly higher percentage of second graders were being retained. But the most dramatic figures were those for first grade, where one of every seven students (14 percent) was held back.

Kindergarten retention rates in 1980 were lower than those for grades one through three, but they rose steadily thereafter, reaching 11.8 percent in 1987, while those in the three primary grades fell. Then, in 1988, the kindergarten rates also began to come down. By 1992-93, kindergarten retention was 3.5 percent and retention rates in first, second, and third grade had fallen to 3.6, 1.6, and 1 percent, respectively.

Retention in Kindergarten and the Primary Grades, Florida Public Schools, 1980-81 to 1992-93



SOURCE: Florida Department of Education

How can the reversal of increases in kindergarten retention after 1987-88 be explained? In some measure, it can undoubtedly be attributed to improved pre-school services in Florida. A number of initiatives aimed at improving children's readiness for school were introduced during the 1980s, including the *Preschool Early Intervention* program for three- and four-year olds.

Disillusionment with retention as a strategy for improving children's subsequent performance also appears to have played a significant role. By the mid-1980s, many schools were backing away from retention in favor of more individualized interventions to help children at risk of failure. It is notable that retention in each of the primary grades continued to fall during the period when the sharpest declines in kindergarten retention were occurring.

The Florida Legislature repealed the third-grade test requirement in 1989-90. But by then kindergarten and primary grade retention rates had already fallen far below their earlier, unsustainable levels.

Retention does not even seem to achieve its most frequently cited goal—enabling children to mature emotionally and socially. Many children who have been retained are rated below average in social maturity by their first grade teachers the second time around, despite the fact that they are now a year older.

Realistic expectations, not social promotion

Reducing or eliminating kindergarten and primary grade retention should be a goal of every school system. It can only be successful, however, if accompanied by realistic expectations and a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Unless teachers are prepared to deal with diverse groups of children by means other than rejecting or ignoring those who fall outside some arbitrary norm, simply banning retention will only lead to social promotion. Children who would once have been retained may simply languish when teachers are unwilling to respond to their unique needs. Others may find themselves referred inappropriately to special education or other non-inclusive class groupings.

Helping children "where you find them"

Schools that retain many children in kindergarten or transitional classrooms typically are those that use highly structured curricula and rigid proficiency standards unsuitable to the wide developmental range normal for primary-age children. Schools that retain fewer children, on the other hand, tend to have more cooperative arrangements between teachers at different grade levels and to share a philosophy "that you take children where you find them and move them to the extent of their abilities." Teachers in these schools believe they have a responsibility to pick up instruction with each child where the previous teacher left off, including working on prerequisite skills whose absence would be considered a deficit warranting retention in another school. These schools also tend to use developmentally appropriate instructional strategies and individualized support services that have been proven effective in promoting learning and development.

The idea that schools have a responsibility to meet the needs of all children raises an obvious question. If age is the best criterion for school entry and grade retention is not a viable option for most children, *what can be done to help children who are less ready for school than their peers?*

The answer to that question is, there is a great deal we can do. In a recent article in the journal *Educational Leadership*, Robert Slavin and colleagues reviewed research on the effects of various programs designed to prevent early school failure. They concluded that

> *. . . . a growing body of evidence refutes the proposition that school failure is inevitable for any but the most retarded children. Further, the programs and practices that, either alone or in combination, have the strongest evidence of effectiveness for preventing school failure for virtually all students are currently available and replicable. None of them is exotic or radical.*

One-to-One Tutoring: Early Intervention That Works

In their review of early intervention programs at the primary school level, Slavin and his colleagues focused on prevention of early reading failure. They found that one strategy stood out clearly from all others in terms of effectiveness—one-to-one tutoring, beginning in the first grade, for children identified as having reading problems. They concluded that "All forms of tutoring were more effective than any other first grade reading strategy," but those which used certified teachers as tutors were most beneficial.

Intervention for effective reading

Three different models using teachers as first grade reading tutors have been extensively studied and found to be effective. These are *Reading Recovery*, *Prevention of Learning Disabilities*, and *Success for All* (a comprehensive program that includes one-to-one tutoring). All three programs have been found to produce gains in reading that averaged 75 percent or more at the end of first grade. Programs using specially trained non-teachers as tutors produced gains that were more modest, but still substantially better than those from any other intervention. Equally important, follow-up studies suggest that the gains from these tutoring programs persist at least up to the end of third grade.

Other interventions besides one-to-one tutoring can also have positive effects on early school success, but the gains tend to be smaller. Reducing class size can increase reading achievement modestly, but the reductions must be significant to be meaningful. Reductions in class size on the order of 35 percent or more have been found to produce gains of around 10 percent in reading performance, for example.

One-to-one tutoring is an intensive early intervention strategy that can greatly improve the chances for at-risk students to achieve success. No one intervention, however, can significantly improve school performance in the long run unless accompanied by the kinds of general improvements in curriculum and instruction discussed earlier in this report. In the words of Slavin and his colleagues, "*Intensive* early intervention

READING RECOVERY™
Preventing Early School Failure in Arkansas

Reading Recovery™ is an early intervention program developed in New Zealand which is designed to reduce reading failure. The program uses individually administered, developmentally appropriate diagnostic procedures to identify the poorest readers in a class. Children receive intensive one-to-one instruction with a specially trained Reading Recovery™ teacher for 30 minutes a day over 12 to 20 weeks. Instruction is based on detailed analysis of the behavior and knowledge level of the individual child.

In 1991-92, with support from the Arkansas General Assembly and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock began training Reading Recovery™ teachers to implement the program in Arkansas public schools. By the end of the 1992-93 school year, Reading Recovery™ programs were serving first-grade children in nine Arkansas school districts.

Early results from Reading Recovery™ in Arkansas have been extremely positive. Of 152 first grade children who received the full program during 1992-93, 84 percent had successfully completed it by the end of the year. Early follow-up studies indicate that the gains from the program have been maintained through second grade. On assessments of reading, writing, and spelling ability, children who had completed the program outscored a random sample of their peers on all three measures at the end of their second grade year.

During 1992-93, a small group instruction program called Early Literacy was added for children found to need help who could not be accommodated in the one-to-one program at the beginning of the year. Children in the Early Literacy program receive 45 minutes of small-group instruction each day until a space opens for them in the one-to-one program. Preliminary findings strongly suggest that children who receive the Early Literacy program are able to make more rapid progress once they do begin Reading Recovery™ than those who do not.

The response of primary teachers and administrators to the Reading Recovery and Early Literacy programs has been enthusiastic. One administrator summed up his experience with the comment that "Children are turning into success stories instead of failures."

SOURCE: The University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Reading Recovery™ Project.

must be followed by *extensive* changes in basic classroom instructional practices if all students are to succeed throughout their elementary years." The short-term gains achieved by individual students will not last in the long-run unless the learning environment for all children improves.

Focus on children and families

Similarly, intensive early learning interventions like one-to-one tutoring will have only limited effects unless other factors that impede learning are also addressed. Children who are unhealthy or malnourished or who have inadequate support at home will have difficulty taking full advantage of any opportunities they are offered. Strategies that focus on children while ignoring the importance of the family to successful learning are doomed to failure. And the benefits of even the most effective interventions can be quickly reversed unless steps are taken to ensure continuity and follow-up in later years.

Parent Involvement

Parents are the most powerful and permanent forces in children's lives. They provide continuity for growth by helping children integrate what they learn both inside and outside of school. They influence their children's attitudes and dispositions toward school. And they possess invaluable information about their children that is invaluable in helping schools meet the needs of the individual child.

Parents as resources and partners

Parents should be partners with schools and teachers, and should be involved in decision-making about their children's educations. Schools must create an environment that not only encourages parents to become involved but also rewards teachers for helping them to do so. Such involvement goes well beyond the common role of parents as volunteers or teachers' helpers. This type of partnership requires that both parents and schools recognize that both are necessary to the success of children and that neither can do the job alone.

Much lip service is paid to the importance of parental involvement. Translating the idea into effective practice is more difficult. Too often, meaningful collaboration between parents and schools is hampered by mutual suspicion. Parents, especially those whose own school experiences were less than positive, may feel uncomfortable with schools in general, and that discomfort inevitably will be communicated both to their children and to teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, may view parents as uncaring or uninformed in their ideas about what their children need. These problems can be especially difficult when parents and teachers come from different cultural backgrounds.

Parents want to help

Research indicates that most parents, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds or different cultures, care deeply about and want to be supportive of their children's educations. Many of them do not know how to be involved, however. Language barriers, historical patterns of exclusion, and feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem may make some parents reluctant to offer or seek support. Parents also face time constraints that may limit their ability to attend meetings and other school functions. Activities that are scheduled without regard to work schedules and family needs may be interpreted by parents as a sign that their input is not valued. Ironically, poor parent attendance at these activities may be erroneously viewed by teachers as indicative of parent disinterest.

Work toward a common goal

The essential first step toward increasing parent involvement is an acknowledgement that parents, teachers, and schools all want essentially the same things for children. They want them to be motivated to learn, to master basic academic skills, and to be socially competent. They want them to succeed in school, though they may differ in their understanding of what it takes to achieve that success.

Once a serious commitment has been made to involving parents, schools can do a variety of things to help them and create an environment in which they feel welcome. At the heart of effective parent involvement is open communication. In its *Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children*, the National Association of Elementary School Principals points out that this communication "must be two-way—not a situation in which educators talk and parents passively listen."

Communication is the key

Communication between parents and schools should take multiple forms. Parents should be informed regularly about the philosophy, curriculum, goals, and progress of the school and its programs. Specific examples should be provided to help parents understand how general principles translate into real educational experiences for their children. A variety of different approaches (including newsletters, the telephone, the popular print and broadcast media, and even faxes and e-mail and computers) should be used to ensure that the information reaches as many families as possible.

To be effective in promoting parent involvement, formal communications like these should include procedures for letting parents know that their reactions and comments are valued. One way of fostering this understanding is to conduct parent surveys, both written and by telephone, and ensure that future communications acknowledge this feedback. Incorporating parent concerns in program evaluation materials can also let parents know that their concerns are taken seriously.

Making time for parents

Equally important are less formal opportunities for communication. When they contact the school, parents should be assured either of reaching someone in a responsible position or at least of receiving a prompt response. Teachers should be readily available to meet with parents, and should be provided with time on the school schedule to do so. Every effort should be made to accommodate parents who make the effort to visit or contact the school, even though the timing may be inconvenient.

Teachers can encourage interaction with parents by sending notes home that elicit a parent's response, by calling parents directly to talk about their children, and by visiting parents and children in their homes. Actively soliciting parent's input and advice about problems involving their children can contribute significantly to a feeling of empowerment.

Teachers and schools also should see their role in part as educating parents to help them become more knowledgeable about the overall operations of the school and more effective in working with their own chil-

Hippy

One of the best known programs designed to increase parents' involvement in their children's education is HIPPY—the Home Instructional Program for Preschool Youngsters. HIPPY, which was developed in Israel, is designed specifically for parents with little formal schooling themselves.

HIPPY is a two-year program for parents of four- and five-year-old children. The second year is intended to overlap with kindergarten. Parent training takes place four times a month, twice in their own home and twice with other parents at a group site. Parents are provided with educational materials and learn how to teach their children specific lessons. Each training session lasts from 15 to 20 minutes.

While every HIPPY program has a professional coordinator, most training is done by other parents who have children in the program. The use of parents as teachers in the program not only builds parents' self-confidence about their own abilities, but also encourages a sense of community ownership of the program. Regular meetings of support groups provide an opportunity for parents to share their experiences, discuss problems, and help each other define goals.

Because the second year of the program overlaps with the year children are in kindergarten, it provides a mechanism for helping to ease both parents' and children's transitions from preschool to school. It also give parents an opportunity to learn how to work with the schools their children will attend.

Though the HIPPY model has been tried in a number of states, its widest implementation has been in Arkansas. Financial support comes from local sources, as well as a variety of federal programs, including Chapter 1, Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant.

Local control of the programs means that they can be tailored to individual community needs while building on the basic HIPPY curriculum. In many Arkansas communities, the HIPPY programs have expanded beyond their original parent education mandate, building on their networks of parents to help improve delivery of a variety of other social and human services.

dren. Sending home appropriate materials and suggestions about ways parents can reinforce classroom experiences can be very helpful in both involving and educating parents.

Support and understanding

Schools must also be more cognizant of the outside forces that affect children and their families. Active involvement in helping families obtain the kinds of comprehensive services they need to alleviate economic, health, social, and emotional problems may be beyond the resources available to many schools. Acknowledging the impact of such problems on children, and offering support without blame, can help encourage parents to seek solutions on their own, however. And more and more states and communities are exploring innovative ways to help families obtain needed services. Schools should be integrally involved in such activities.

Efforts to increase parent involvement may take time to bear fruit, especially where it has been neither common or encouraged in the past. With time and commitment from the schools, however, such efforts should gradually increase parents' understanding of schools as well as their willingness to become involved. And as they become more involved, they should also become more effective in teaching and supporting their own children, which should, in turn, make the schools' job easier.

Allies for change

Parent involvement should be a top institutional priority in all schools, but it is especially critical when schools attempt to implement developmentally appropriate curriculum changes. Parents who are kept well informed and involved can provide vital support for such changes. The skepticism and suspicion of parents who are alienated from their children's schools can doom them.

Transitions: Continuity Amid Change

Undermining Head Start

In the predictable but varying course of child development, continuity is a critical element. Every time a child moves from one grade or educational setting to another, there is a risk that earlier progress may be lost because of poor communication or inappropriate teaching methods. Strong evidence exists, for example, that the highly publicized "fade out" of benefits three or four years after Head Start graduates enter school more often results from inadequacies in the schools many of these the children attend than from problems with the Head Start experience itself.

In its 1992 report *Transitions to Kindergarten in American Schools*, the United States Department of Education found that few schools give adequate attention to helping children make the transition from preschool (or home or child care) to kindergarten. Only 10 percent of

schools surveyed had any provision for systematic communication between kindergarten teachers and previous teachers or caregivers. Only 12 percent of kindergartens had considered children's pre-school experiences in designing their curricula.

Teachers talking about children

The importance of easing transitions is not limited to the move to kindergarten, however. Every move to a new grade involves another transition—and another opportunity for problems to develop. The importance of communication between teachers about children's individual strengths and weaknesses may seem obvious. But, in a school characterized by inflexible standards and curricula, such communication may be perceived by teachers as a waste of time. They "know" what they are supposed to teach and what every child is supposed to learn at each level. The unique needs of the individual child are of secondary importance in this kind of educational "factory."

One of the most important steps to providing continuity is to ensure that programs at all levels—pre-school, kindergarten, and primary grades—are developmentally appropriate. Responding to the unique needs of individual children is a key component of developmental appropriateness. Programs that do not feature regular communication about children are unlikely to be developmentally appropriate.

Components of Successful Preschool-To-School Transition Programs

The U.S. Department of Education's National Transition Study identified five key strategies of successful transition programs:

1. Preschools and elementary schools should have written agreements with detailed descriptions of each school's responsibilities in implementing a transition program.
2. Preschool records should be transferred to elementary schools regularly to ensure that there is no break in services when a child enters elementary school.
3. Transition programs should operate throughout the year instead of just at the end of the year when change is imminent.
4. Parents should receive sufficient information about the public schools and how to access services.
5. Kindergarten teachers should visit their future students wherever possible, and preschool programs should provide opportunities for their children to visit future kindergarten classrooms.

SOURCE: Kagan, S.L., Forward, *Sharing Success in the Southeast: Promising Programs in Preschool-to-School Transition*, SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE), University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1992.

Change takes time

Further complicating the situation is the fact that different classrooms within a given school, and even a given grade, tend to span a broad range—from developmentally appropriate to traditionally academic, with many variations in between. Developmental appropriateness is not something that can be imposed on teachers overnight. Some teachers will take longer than others to fully accept new philosophies and practices that may seem very different from what they are accustomed to. While it is important to move steadily toward developmental appropriateness, it is equally important not to force teachers to change more quickly than they are able.

Formal written policies designed to facilitate transitions among these varying classrooms can provide an important building block for moving teachers in the desired direction. The mere fact of communicating with other teachers about differences between children should serve to reinforce the validity of developmentally appropriate practice and help reluctant teachers understand and accept the concept.

Multi-age grouping

One approach to easing transitions that has gained popularity recently is multi-age grouping, or the ungraded primary. This model breaks the traditional abrupt transition from grade to grade down into numerous smaller transitions that can be more easily managed. It also allows maximum flexibility in responding to every child's needs. Transitions into and out of an ungraded primary can still present difficulties that must be addressed if the benefits of multi-age grouping are to be realized and sustained, however.

Another strategy some schools have tried is housing pre-school, kindergarten, and one or more primary grades in a single location to facilitate communication and information sharing between grades. While this approach can be effective in easing transitions between the levels involved, it also may result in increased problems when children have to make the transition to the next higher grade that is not part of the combined program.

Breaking down walls of separation

It is important to note that physical proximity by itself does not necessarily lead to open communication. In at least one case where preschool and kindergarten programs were located in the same building, the two groups of teachers still had little or no interaction after several years—many did not even know each other by name. This anecdote highlights the importance of making communication about students a standard of everyday practice, especially among teachers at adjacent levels.

The Multi-Age Primary Classroom: The Kentucky Experience

The primary school provisions of the *Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990* are probably the most widely publicized effort to reform primary education in the SREB region. The act mandates implementation of multi-age, multi-ability, developmentally appropriate primary programs in all elementary schools in Kentucky by September 1993.

The goal of the new Kentucky primary program is to allow children to experience success while progressing according to their individual learning needs. Schools are allowed substantial flexibility in the ways children are grouped. Regardless of the groupings used, all children are required to complete the primary program successfully before entering fourth grade.

Implementation of the primary program to date varies widely among different schools. However, in their second year report on the program, the out-of-state consultants retained to track the program concluded that much progress has been made. In schools that had been actively implementing the program for more than one year, the consultants found teachers generally more supportive of the reforms than they had been a year earlier. The teachers reported that:

- Children are writing more, are better informed, are more ready to learn, and are more able to use what they learn than before reform;
- Children are less isolated by age and more likely to strike up friendships and work together in groups;
- Children are more enthusiastic about learning and much less likely to be absent.

The consultants found that the schools most successful in implementing the primary program shared a number of attributes, including:

- The use of non-overlapping grade groupings (e.g., K-1 and 2-3, instead of K-1, 1-2, *and* 2-3) with two-grade groupings preferred to broader ranges;
- Parental commitment to the program;
- Principals who were dedicated to and highly supportive of the reforms;
- Teachers who had participated in training programs on whole language, cooperative learning, and "hands-on" teaching;
- Availability of parent volunteers, aides, and/or student teachers to help in the classroom;
- A willingness to collapse special education into regular classrooms.

The most common problems reported in implementing the primary program reforms were continued confusion and misunderstanding about the requirements and intent of the law; a lack of adequate parent involvement; and difficulty including five-year-old children in multi-age groupings, especially in schools that have retained half-day kindergartens.

SOURCE: Rath, J. and J. Fanning, "Primary Program Reform in Kentucky Revisited," *Second Year Reports to the Prichard Committee*, The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Lexington, 1993.

Staff Development

In any serious effort to reform primary education, teachers must play a central role. Unfortunately, many current kindergarten and primary teachers are ill prepared to implement a developmentally appropriate curriculum. It is not unusual to find teachers in these grades who have no specialized training or experience working with young children.

Kindergarten and primary teachers should be formally trained in child development, language acquisition, appropriate instructional and assessment techniques, curriculum development, and ways to involve parents from diverse backgrounds in the education of their children. Newly licensed teachers should be required to obtain certification in early childhood education in order to teach kindergarten through third grade.

Making Change Work in Auburn

The Auburn, Alabama, Early Education Center opened in the fall of 1992. In an effort to ease children's transitions to school, the center merged 18 kindergartens from three different elementary schools in a single facility.

One of the primary goals of the new school is to provide a developmentally appropriate program for all kindergarten children in the Auburn school system.

In addition to the kindergarten classes, the center also offers a program for preschoolers with special needs and a day care program for school employees. This provides opportunities for mainstreaming the special needs children in both preschool and kindergarten.

The three schools the kindergartens were drawn from ranged from very traditional to a mix of traditional and developmentally appropriate practices. To encourage a sense of ownership and team spirit among this diverse group, teachers were given an active role in the operation of the new school from the start.

Prior to opening, all teachers were involved in developing a mission statement and goals for the school. A faculty retreat provided an opportunity to identify common concerns and begin building personal relationships. All teachers were asked to identify one other person they felt they would like to teach with, and each pair was then assigned to one of three pods of six teachers each. Each pod has a large measure of autonomy in its own operations. A representative from each pod also serves on a School-Based Support Staff Team, which has responsibilities for decision-making about many issues that affect the school as a whole.

The first year of operation was a period of learning and adjustment for both teachers and staff. At the end of the year, two of the 18 teachers transferred back to their previous schools. Both were committed to a skills-based approach to educating young children and felt they would be more comfortable in a more traditional environment.

Feedback and incentives

More difficult is the problem of retraining current teachers. Retraining will require a long-term plan developed with substantial involvement from the teachers themselves. Existing continuing education requirements could provide a vehicle for such retraining. Primary teachers could be required to take continuing education in early childhood areas where they are deficient in order to maintain their certification. Alternatively, they could be encouraged to do so through incentives such as paid time off for appropriate training and opportunities to advance up the salary scale.

On a day-to-day basis, developmentally appropriate practice in primary classrooms can be stimulated by providing teachers with ongoing feedback and guidance based on extensive observation by experts qualified in both early childhood education and staff development techniques. Visits by teachers to observe developmentally appropriate classrooms and discussions with accomplished teachers can also be effective.

During the second year, every teacher who continued from the first year was given a leadership role of some kind, either as a representative to the School Based Support Staff Team or as a committee chairperson. A shared sense of commitment to finding new ways to meet the needs of young children and their families began to take shape. Sessions in which teachers were encouraged to share ideas and experiences evolved from awkward attempts to communicate to lively discussions on a wide variety of topics.

A number of small "networking" groups have developed around specific areas of interest. From the beginning, a high priority of teachers and administrators has been to work with parents to educate them about the curriculum and their own roles in educating their children. Regular meetings with teachers, a weekly newsletter, and a telephone information line have helped to open channels of communication. Most parents have welcomed the opportunity to be more involved in their children's educations.

The principal problem the Auburn Early Childhood Center faces as it enters its third year of operation involves the transition from kindergarten to first grade. The first grades the children move to remain largely academic in orientation. Although students meet all requirements for promotion from the developmentally appropriate kindergarten program, they are still often confronted in first grade with many of the expectations associated with a traditional curriculum. In a pattern that has become familiar in such situations, parents sometimes become confused when first grade teachers seem to contradict what the center has taught them about the way children learn.

Faculty and staff are committed to the concept of the center and hopeful that the transition problems can be resolved with time and experience. An increased emphasis on staff development in areas related to developmentally appropriate practice for both center and elementary school faculty should help bridge the gap in expectations. Joint curriculum planning between kindergarten and first grade teachers is also expected to help ease transition problems.

Ensuring that all kindergarten and primary-grade teachers are qualified in early childhood education will not happen overnight. However, the process can be accelerated by giving hiring priority to teachers qualified in early childhood when filling positions in kindergarten through third grade.

The essential principal

Equally important is support and encouragement from administrators. Resistance to developmentally appropriate practice can be expected from some teachers who have spent their careers teaching in ways that were viewed as state-of-the art when they were in college. For teachers to be supportive of change, they will need consistent indications that change will be rewarded rather than penalized.

Administrators who verbally support developmentally appropriate practice but continue to press teachers to obtain high student scores on achievement tests will find that their actions speak louder than their words. Administrators of primary programs should have appropriate training in early childhood education in order to be not only managers but effective advocates for change.

The Economics of Change

No discussion of the need for change in the way schools do business can be complete without addressing funding. Unquestionably, increased funding for education could be put to excellent use in employing additional teachers, improving facilities, and increasing access to learning aids such as computers and other materials.

It would be a serious mistake, however, to view increased education funding by itself as an adequate solution to the problem of schools that are not ready for children. Even substantial increases in resources would be likely to have only modest effects unless changes are made in the way primary schools operate. Much can be accomplished simply by changing the way existing education funds are used.

In their research on programs that work in preventing school failure, Slavin and his colleagues concluded:

> *We have evidence. . . . to suggest that we can ensure the school success of the majority of disadvantaged, at-risk students using the local and Chapter 1* funds already allocated to these schools in different ways (primarily to improve curriculum, instruction, and classroom management in the regular classroom). However, to ensure the success of all at-risk students takes a greater investment.*

Not "if" but "when"

Slavin's research group suggests that any child not seriously retarded could succeed in school if provided with some combination of intensive birth-to-three services; high-quality pre-school programs; and improvements in curriculum, instruction, family support, and other services (including tutoring) in elementary school. "The key issue for at-risk students," they note, "is not *if* additional costs will be necessary, but *when* they should be provided."

The most critical elements of change needed in kindergarten and the primary grades are developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction and increased parental involvement. Both should be possible without major increases in funding, though some resources probably will be required for teacher retraining. Developmentally appropriate curricula for all students would significantly reduce the need for special education

* Chapter 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides financial assistance to state and local education agencies for compensatory education programs for educationally deprived and disadvantaged children. Chapter 1 is the main source of federal aid in elementary and secondary education today.

and remedial and gifted programs. All of these require some duplication of resources and personnel that might be used more effectively in integrated core programs or for intensive one-on-one tutorial programs.

Paying for what works

Efforts to improve the performance of at-risk children in schools take a wide variety of forms, and some of these interventions have been shown to be more effective than others. Grade retention is an excellent example of a strategy that is both costly and ineffective. Funds now spent to put children through the same grade twice could be used to far greater benefit to support programs that have been shown to be more effective and less costly, such as individual tutoring and summer enrichment and learning programs.

For such programs to be fully effective, schools need substantially more flexibility in the way they spend state and local funds than they generally have today. Contrary to popular belief, elementary schools have considerable leeway in the way they use federal Chapter 1 funds. School systems should have similar flexibility in the way they spend state and local funds, and school districts should avoid unnecessary spending restrictions on individual schools.

Increasing Local Control in South Carolina

The State of South Carolina took an important step toward allowing greater local flexibility with the *Early Child Development and Academic Assistance Act of 1993* (Act 135). This legislation provides new funding to help schools implement developmentally appropriate programs in kindergarten through grade 3 and academic assistance programs in grades 4-12. It also allows broad flexibility in the use of existing state remediation funds.

Under the law, districts and schools must focus on problem solving rather than reacting, including programs aimed at preschool children and their families where appropriate. A statewide parenting program for parents of children under age five is a central part of the legislation, and each district must also develop its own parenting family literacy component. The programs must include collaboration among education, social service and health agencies, and adult education at both the state and district levels.

As important as these specific programs are, it is equally important that Act 135 gives schools substantial local control over the ways they use both new and existing funds. The legislation allows services to be provided to "any student in these grades" who needs academic assistance, regardless of whether he or she meets some definition of "at-risk."

Act 135 provides funds specifically to encourage innovation, and directs the State Board of Education to "stress district and school flexibility in addressing student needs." Schools and school districts are required to develop strategic plans to guide the use of the flexible funds. And they must demonstrate broad community involvement in the planning process.

The parenting and innovation components of Act 135 began in the 1993-94 school year. Other aspects of the law will be implemented in 1994-95.

Prevention not remediation

There is little question that early intervention can be far more cost effective than later remediation. Failure of students in the primary grades to master basic skills and develop positive attitudes toward learning leads to intransigent problems that typically can be amended only at high cost and with marginal chances of success in later grades. Focusing more of the resources now used for remediation on assuring success for all students in the primary years would promise a far greater return on investment.

Slavin and his colleagues put it succinctly: "By every standard of evidence, logic, and compassion, dollars used preventively make more sense than the same dollars used remedially."

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